

England. — Churches, &c. — Baptists. — Kent
and Sussex Assoc. of Particular Baptist
Churches. T H E

CIRCULAR LETTER.

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THE
ELDERS AND MINISTERS
OF THE
BAPTIST CHURCHES
MEETING

At ASHFORD, SAUNDERS, SMARDEN, TENTERDON, in KENT; RYE, ROTHERFIELD, WEAVELSFIELD, in SUSSEX; assembled in ASSOCIATION at ASHFORD, the 1st and 2d of June, 1779: maintaining the important Doctrines of three equal Persons in one divine Essence, eternal and personal Election to Holiness here and Salvation hereafter; the original Guilt and Depravity of Mankind; particular Redemption; free Justification by the imputed Righteousness of CHRIST alone; efficacious Grace in Regeneration; the Perseverance of the Saints to Glory. Professing likewise Water Baptism upon a personal Confession of Faith in CHRIST and Repentance towards GOD, according to the primitive Mode and Discipline of the Christian Church.

To the several Churches they represent, send Christian Salutation, Mercy, Peace, and Love, with every other Grace abound among you, through our Lord Jesus Christ.

Dearly beloved Brethren in our glorious LORD,

AS you are already acquainted by our preliminaries with our intention in meeting together, that it is neither to make laws for ourselves, nor for the Churches, but to assist one another in putting the laws of CHRIST into execution, for his glory; and to cultivate love and friendship among ourselves and the Churches, for your peace and prosperity; these things lie very near our hearts; for, we trust, we are willing to spend and to be spent for God's glory, and the salvation of our fellow-men. As we have thus convened together, hoping, by the Divine Blessing, to be instrumental in reviving the power of religion, and the order of primitive Christianity; and as it is a new thing to some, especially the manner in which we think proper to conduct it, according to the plan proposed, it



is not to be wondered if many do not see the utility of such a practice. But, perhaps, if those persons had lived in the time of our Saviour here upon earth, they would not have thought it very expedient for him and his followers, to withdraw from the national religion, which he often did, and protested against its corruptions; tho' he attended that part of it which was of God, but separated himself and his followers into a distinct society, at the risk of incurring the displeasure of the great, and the expences that would attend a separate communion, and has till this day, blessed be his name! established the Gospel standard, that those who are called out of darkness into marvellous light, might separate themselves from the world, join his followers, and enlist themselves under his banner. What glorious struggles our forefathers made in this lawful and important cause; not only when they separated themselves from Popery, when that spawn of Hell was established here in Britain; but likewise when they separated themselves from the present established mode of worshipping God? Many scriptural reasons and solid arguments they published to the world to prove the lawfulness of their conduct.

As CHRIST is the GREAT HEAD of the Church, there is no man, or set of men, upon earth has authority to make laws, for the subjects of CHRIST's spiritual kingdom, in matters of faith and conscience. The laws and rules of our religion are in the sacred oracles; well would it be, if we lived more under the benign influence of them!

But to recommend to you, brethren, this branch of primitive conduct of the Churches of God, associating themselves together, altho' we acknowledge, that when corruption and love of power prevailed, it lost its pristine glory, and was degraded into an engine of state, for wicked princes to impose human creeds and formularies upon the consciences of men; but we have sufficiently provided against that abuse; for we are not only destitute of a coercive power, but have agreed in our preliminaries to force nothing upon any; and our association consists of far more lay-brethren than ministers: therefore, there can be no probability of assuming power in favour of ministerial authority over our Churches; for our assembly is not a convocation of diocesan bishops, or tyrannical priests; nor is it to contrive any thing in politics; but, according to the primitive mode, to promote the great affairs of religion.

We find in the New Testament two sorts of Apostles, one sort chosen by our LORD in an extraordinary manner, endowed with peculiar gifts for very extraordinary work; the other, men of grace and gifts, chosen by the Churches, 2 Cor. viii. 19. to travail with the Apostles, to assist them in transacting the various business of the Churches, and to sit in their assemblies, representing their respective Churches which had chosen them; and these are called, "The MESSENGERS of the Churches;" and Paul says, that "they are the glory of CHRIST," 2 Cor. viii. 23, or as some say, the glory of the Christian Religion, and of the Churches; that they had men capable to represent them in an association; men, who had wisdom to give their advice in difficult cases, in the fear of God, according to his word; which was for his glory, and of unspeakable advantage to every Church. By such a practice, under God, their peace and prosperity were great and perspicuous. This is confirmed in Acts xv. We find there, the church of Antioch was distracted by a great controversy about the necessity of circumcision, and of keeping some ceremonial parts of the

the law of Moses. Though the church at Antioch had power to decide the matter among themselves, and though Paul and Barnabas were there; yet, for mutual satisfaction, they agreed to send their case by Paul and Barnabas, with other chosen brethren to Jerusalem, for it to be settled by the assembly there: And we find that the subject was thoroughly canvassed and settled by them, and their decision sent, as an advice, by the brethren to Antioch. The whole proves beyond all doubt, that neither the Apostles, nor the assembly at Jerusalem, nor the church at Antioch, had the least notion that infant-baptism was to be in the room of circumcision; for if that had been the case, there was an absolute necessity to mention it, especially upon such an occasion, which would have satisfied all parties, and ended the controversy at once; for if there had been such a ceremony practised upon the children, at their dedication to God, no mortal would have wished the continuance of such a painful, bloody, and ignominious rite as circumcision was deemed by the Gentiles. Such consultation of many Churches together, does not imply that any Churches have any superiority over one another; for even the assembly at Jerusalem only gave their advice; and, doubtless, the Church uniting her wisdom and strength in this manner, is the most powerful means under God, according to his promises, to keep the several branches in peace and unity respecting faith and practice: according to this example, the baptized Churches have, more or less when permitted, convened thus together in all ages, and they found the happy effects of such assemblies: though, as we have hinted already, this Apostolical practice has been greatly abused by the meetings of Popes, Bishops, and their tools; but that is no plea against it, more than against Gospel Doctrines and Gospel Ordinances. For what has been abused more than they have? But let us, brethren, attempt to restore the good old primitive practice, depending upon the great Master of assemblies for his presence and blessing, that we may be successful. This is what our forefathers did as soon as ever liberty of conscience was granted. The English Baptists held a general assembly in London, which began sitting September the 7th, and continued till the 11th of the same month, 1689. The Assembly consisted of 150 persons, Elders and Messengers, representing upwards of 100 Churches in England and Wales. This laudable design we desire to follow, to consult about proper ways and means to advance the glory of God, and the welfare of our respective Churches. They published a narrative of their proceedings, gave many excellent exhortations and instructions to the Churches, and to wipe off the foul aspersions that are too commonly cast by the Old Serpent upon the followers of the Lamb, they republished a confession of faith which had been published in the year 1677. This meeting was every day opened and concluded by fervent prayers to God; all were united as with one heart in the spirit of love and harmony, which ran through all their debates, consultations and resolves. They carefully discussed, not only the Scriptural Doctrines and Ordinances, which are now believed and practised among the Orthodox Baptist Churches; but likewise the doctrine of morality, and gave their opinion, as an advice, concerning many branches of domestic duties. They generously opened and instituted a public fund for the assistance of Ministers and Churches, likewise to encourage the education of gracious and gifted youths, designed for the ministry, in the learned languages, with other arts and sciences; so that

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It is a false aspersiion cast upon the Baptists, that they do not encourage literature, and that they have no learned men among them. Another General Assembly like the former was held in *London* from the 2d to the 8th of *June*, 1691; and a third from the 2d to the 24th of *May*, 1692. These Assemblies were held upon a scriptural foundation for peace and unity, as ours is; and in each of these associations many excellent subjects for the glory of God, and the prosperity of the Churches, were discussed in the most cool, discreet, and candid manner; the whole was in a way of advice, not to make laws.

After matters were so honourably settled in these venerable Assemblies, which do great honour to their memories, they found it rather inconvenient to come from distant parts annually to *London*; upon the same generous plan they agreed, therefore, to form themselves into smaller Assemblies, as it would be most convenient for them; which they do to their profit in divers parts of the kingdom at this day. As we, brethren, in conformity to these antient and modern precedents, and by the especial kindness of our gracious God are now assembled, we shall give you a short account of our association, and close our address with a few brotherly exhortations.

We can with humble gratitude inform you, that we in great mercy met in peace, and we hope not without some tokens of the divine presence and blessing. We have read your letters, and endeavoured to feel their contents, and carried them and you to the Divine Throne, many fervent prayers we have been enabled to offer up to God on various accounts, especially for you and yours; it is for your spiritual and eternal interests we are particularly concerned: to promote this we daily pray, we study, we preach, we watch over you in love. We earnestly recommend these things to your prayers, forget not still to cry unto God for our rightful sovereign King George, his royal Consort and Family: and that these awful judgments which hang over us may be averted, and an honourable peace restored, and religion universally revived. Glad should we be if we could inform you, that all the Churches are in perfect peace, all having their lamps burning bright, none unstable or wavering, none lukewarm, fruitless, unprofitable, none self-willed, proud, rash, censorious, opiniative, and of an unforgiving spirit among them, giving us occasion to be jealous, that they have nothing but a mere name of a profession. But, blessed be God, "*Ichabod*, the glory is departed," is not written upon any. They have the means of grace, all have had some additions, and many desire a revival, to glorify God, and to adorn the religion they profess, by bearing much fruit. Brethren, as we seek neither honour nor self-interest, but your present profit and future happiness, you will bear with us as stewards of God and watchmen of souls, to beseech you earnestly to consider, that we live in a day of great declension both as to doctrine and practice. You all profess to believe and maintain the peculiar and excellent doctrines of Bible religion, which are essential to Christianity; and trust that none among you imbibe the fashionable religion of the time, which is zealously and indiscriminately to decry all creeds, confessions of faith, gospel order, and church discipline, as invading their liberty as Christians, which too many wrap themselves in as a cloak for their licentiousness. We charge you, that while ye are zealous in maintaining Gospel-principles, to avoid all manner of sins, and be frequent and

and fervent in your prayers to God, that you may live under the powerful influence of the important truths you profess; that you may by the holiness of your conversation, and humility of temper, adorn the doctrine of our Lord and Saviour, that your conduct may not give the lie to your profession, and thereby cause any to suspect you of hypocrisy. Brethren, be faithful in that important duty, self-examination, look well to yourselves, scrutinize your hearts, desires, ends and views in all that you do; if professors were more observant of their hearts and conduct, they would be less disposed to censure and condemn others; remember that self-knowledge is the most essential: therefore, O man know thyself, what enlargement of heart would this afford us in prayer, and it would enable us to perform the Apostolic exhortation, to "esteem others better than ourselves;" for it would open to us such a scene of natural pollution, depravity and wretchedness, which hath overspread the whole soul, as to cause us thoroughly to believe the doctrine of original sin, and it would keep us ever humble before God.

The gospel truths which you profess to believe, are of a heavenly nature; calculated beyond all other principles in the whole world, to mortify the body of sin in its various branches, to make you holy in heart, lowly in mind, heavenly in affection, peaceable in disposition, evangelical in temper, spiritual in conversation, ornamental to religion, useful in the world, happy in your souls, and to abound in the glorious fruits of righteousness.

You believe the glorious doctrine of the adorable Trinity; consider then, if you call God your Father, and have no concern to love, fear, or obey him, and walk as his dear children, what will it avail you? You profess the divinity and personality of the Holy Spirit, in that you do right; are ye then such who deny your own spirit, temper, self-will, sinful inclination, and careful not to grieve this Holy Spirit? Are ye willing and truly desirous to be taught, led, instructed by the Spirit, walk in the Spirit, and live under his influences? Do you give yourselves up to him for him to dwell in you, to sanctify you wholly in soul, body, and spirit, for him to illuminate your understanding, that you may not mistake some favourite opinion for Gospel truth, natural passion for the work of the Spirit, transient conviction for true conversion, a partial reformation for true religion, a speculative notion for true wisdom that comes from above, a presumptuous confidence for a living faith, fancy for conscience, activity to promote your own interest, and to gratify your temper, instead of a zeal for promoting the interest of Christ? Consider if we are influenced by the Divine Spirit, it shews us our own wretchedness and nothingness, humbles the mind, spiritualizes the affections, purifies the desires, regulates our disposition and conduct, and diffuses its lively and heavenly influence through the inward and the outward man. You believe the doctrine of election, what evidence have you from God, and what proof do you give your neighbours and acquaintance that you are the elect? "What do you more than others?" Though this is a glorious truth, yet a bare belief of it will avail you nothing. Do you consider that the elect are chosen to holiness here, and to walk blameless in love, by an evangelical obedience to all the commandments, as well as to glory hereafter? if you do not make conscience of the former, it is in vain for you to expect the latter.

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We profess to believe original sin: if so, what is the reason that any of us should have such high and exalted thoughts of ourselves, and be so prone to over-value ourselves and under-value others? You that really believe this soul humiliating truth, manifest it by having the meanest thoughts of yourselves, and abhorring yourselves in dust and ashes before God, by humbling yourselves daily under a sense of your sins and imperfections, by daily application to the blood of Jesus, and not be ready to take offence, but be ready to forgive, and to be reconciled when you meet with a real affront.

You profess the doctrine of particular redemption by the precious blood of CHRIST; but what proofs do you give of your redemption from the dominion of sin, slavery of Satan, vain conversation, the snares of the world? Are ye zealous for God, his cause and interest in the world, for good works, and religious duties? Does your conduct manifest that neither sin, Satan, nor the world, has the predominancy over you?

You profess the doctrine of effectual calling and efficacious grace in regeneration: Do you then manifest that ye are called by GOD from the death of sin, to the life of holiness; from darkness, into marvellous light; from the kingdom of Satan, to the kingdom of our LORD JESUS? Are you weary of your sins, your sinful ways, and sinful companions; desirous to separate yourselves and come out from among them? Do you experience a spiritual life infused into your souls, longing for conformity to the image and likeness of CHRIST? Are you willing to come to Jesus as poor lost sinners, by diligent prayer, reading, conscientious attendance upon Gospel Ministry and Gospel Ordinances? Shall the Lord rain manna round about your tents, and you not going forth to gather it? If you can make light of, or neglect these things, what proof do you give that you are called of God and regenerated?

Another Gospel truth you believe is, the perseverance of the saints: But, do you persevere in constantly watching over your hearts? Are you constantly jealous of yourselves in a faithful and diligent performance of all religious duties, whether they are of a private, public, personal, or social nature? Do you continue wrestling with God for the mortification of your sins; for more grace; the application of the promises; for all the ministers of Christ, especially your own minister; and stand by him in adversity; considering that your profit will be in proportion to your love, esteem, and regard for him? Do you continue to be studious in promoting the peace and prosperity of Zion; regular and steady in supporting the worship of God, and zealous for all the means of grace? Do you persevere in guarding against every symptom of backsliding in love, faith, and practice; to avoid every temper, conduct, and passion that is unbecoming the Gospel, and that has the least tendency to disturb the peace of the Church, and to grieve God's people? Do you look upon those who are not disposed to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace, and obey not Gospel rules and Gospel orders, thereby causing strife and contention in the Church, to be enemies of CHRIST, and his Gospel, and the pests of societies? Do ye discountenance and avoid them; for they are such who spread a spiritual plague, confusion, and every evil thing all round them? In a word, if you do not lay aside all malice, guile, wrath, hypocrisies, envy, and all evil speaking; and, as new-born babes, desire the sincere milk of the word, that ye may grow thereby, you give no proof that

that ever you have tasted the grace of God in truth ; or at least, you are far from giving proof that you continue in the exercise of it.

O Brethren! our hearts are enlarged towards you, and we have such concern for your eternal welfare, that we would write to you with our blood, if it had more weight. Consider what God requires of you, and the unspeakable privileges you enjoy beyond other nations, in religious matters: As protestants, and as protestant dissenters, your privileges are not only far beyond God's people under the Jewish dispensation, which was a yoke of bondage, but far beyond your brethren of the established Church, for you are not exposed to such temptations to be satisfied with a form of prayer instead of the power; or of being imposed upon by human ceremonies in your worship, instead of the commandments of God: or of being confined to a perpetual repetition of set forms of prayers, instead of heart prayers; or of being imposed upon by wicked or unqualified ministers whom you approve not, as they are; for your ministers are of your own choosing, and that after you have attended their ministry and have had a sufficient proof of their conversation; and if your ministers grow wilfully remiss in their duty, immoral in their lives, or erroneous in their principles, you have power to dismiss them, which your brethren of the established church have not; therefore, do you esteem them highly for their work sake, as they are your own ministers, of your own choice; and receive their admonitions and reproofs whether in public or in private, as it is part of their business to admonish when needful; and their admonitions should be well taken, as they watch for the profit of your immortal souls. Do you grow more evangelical in your disposition, and in every grace, than others, as you attend such whom you have chosen to break to you the bread of life and your communion is kept more pure as Gospel Discipline is attended to; among you in a profitable manner; therefore in the way of duty you may expect more of the presence and the blessing of God for your edification, comfort and improvement; yet how many are there under such disadvantages, that appear beyond some of you in watchfulness, prayer, temperance, justice, faithfulness, meekness, forbearance, brotherly love and other virtues. We speak thus not to accuse any of you, but with a desire to be instrumental to stir you up to excel others in proportion to your privileges, and one another, in that which is pleasing to God, honorable to religion, and profitable to your own souls; that you may manifest to all that you are the sons of God in very deed, walking before him worthy of your high calling, by divine aids, through the merits of our LORD JESUS. With ardent prayers for your spiritual welfare and immortal happiness, we conclude and remain your affectionate brethren in Christ.

Signed in behalf of the Ministers and Messengers, by the moderator.

THOMAS PURDY.

BREVIATES.

B R E V I A T E S.

Tuesday in the afternoon the ministers and messengers met: Brother Baskerville began in prayer, and brother Cook succeeded him. Brother Purdy was chosen moderator. The preliminaries, likewise the letters from the Churches, were read, and minutes taken of their contents. The Churches at Tenterdon, Rotherfield, and Weavelsfield, were admitted into the association. The state of the Churches was considered, and a query discussed, that was proposed by the Church at Rotherfield, concerning the phrase *imputed sanctification*. At half past six brother Booker prayed; brother Dawson preached from *Rom. iv. 19.* and closed in prayer.

Wednesday, a little after 6, assembled again: Some time was improved in prayer. Brother Morgan, who had been desired to draw up the circular letter, read it. The abovesaid query was further considered; and brother Morgan was desired to write what he had advanced upon the subject, as it was agreeable to the assembly; and at request to be sent by the messengers, as our advice and opinion. Time spent in prayer; assembly adjourned. At 10, public worship began by singing; brother Russell prayed, brother Slinn preached from *Ps. cxxxiii. 1.* brother Copping prayed, brother Purdy preached from *1 Tim. i. 4.* brother Baskerville closed in prayer, and a collection made for him towards defraying the charge of building a meeting house at Hertford; sang suitable hymns at the usual intervals of worship. At 4 o'clock the assembly met: Some time was improved in prayer. It was unanimously agreed for brother Morgan to print the circular letter; and the assembly's opinion upon the above said query was signed by the moderator in the name of the whole, with several passages of scripture annexed thereunto. Agreed for all the Churches to keep the first Wednesday in November, as a day of solemn prayer and fasting, on account of the present unhappy state of public affairs, and the low state of religion. Resolved farther, that the next Association be held at Rotherfield, in Sussex, on the last Tuesday and Wednesday in May, 1780, and that brother Morgan, and brother Copping, preach on Wednesday; in case of failure brother Booker. The ministers and messengers to meet at 3 o'clock Tuesday in the afternoon, at Mr. Stapply's; then the assembly was dismissed with prayer, by the moderator.

P. S. A regular account of the number of the baptized, dead, &c. this last year was not properly given in; which will be expected next year.



F I N I S

THOMAS PURDY

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